

I know you are anxious for Pastor Susan's return. When I looked over the readings assigned for this 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost, I'm thinking it best if she had never left. Dealing with praise for a dishonest manager and deciding how to handle the coin flip between two masters insured a few hours of study and preparation.

Opening the Gospel of Luke to this chapter, it is important that we be reminded that Christ is well on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem and has but a days before he will face an ugly death --- though a glorious resurrection. Additionally, we best consider the first century audience for whom Luke wrote. So, join me again in a little Bible study.

Last week, in the previous chapter, Luke notes that Jesus teaches his disciples with parables for the time when he will no longer be with them. He uses stories of the lost sheep, the misplaced coin and the prodigal son to declare that the lost will be found and the heavens will rejoice!

<sup>1-3</sup> By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, "He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends." (The Message) Their grumbling triggers today's story.

Here, though Jesus speaks primarily to the disciples, we learn that the Pharisees, who loved money, were lending a ear as well. <sup>14-18</sup> When the Pharisees, a money-obsessed bunch, heard him say these things, they rolled their eyes, dismissing him as hopelessly out of touch.

So Jesus spoke to them: "You are masters at making yourselves look good in front of others, but God knows what's behind the appearance; what society sees and calls monumental, God sees through and calls monstrous." (The Message)

Let's see if we can tie all of this together and walk away with some understanding for ourselves.

If you're not sure what to make of today's parable, (Parable of the Dishonest Manager) take some comfort -- I'm not sure Luke was either! There are at least four interpretations offered which would easily lead any confirmation teacher, attempting to provide meaning to a group of teenager, a cause to stutter:

1. The children of the light need to act more shrewdly.
2. Christians should make friends by "dishonest wealth."
3. If you're not faithful with dishonest wealth, who will trust you with the true riches?
4. You cannot serve two masters.

Yikes, talk about confusing!

Hollywood movies often glorify the anti-hero. Those are the ones where the star of the movie is the bad guy --- so lovable that the audience winds up pulling for him as I did when I saw, *The Sting*. There was much to like in it --- the music and the complicated build-up to the surprising sting operation. You cheered when they successfully fleeced the wealthy bad guy. But there I was again, cheering for con men who were clearly stealing. Is that Christian?

We all know that it really is a bad thing to pull for the con men, the crooks and the train robbers, but that's Hollywood! We expect something like that from Hollywood, but not from the Bible --- and certainly not from Jesus. What was Jesus doing praising a dishonest manager? Why did Jesus tell us that we should emulate a man who clearly stole property not belonging to him?

It's the kind of story that I wish was not in the Bible, but it is --- and we are called to wrestle with it.

The story begins with classic story-telling words, "There was a certain rich man who had a manager." There was gossip about this manager. We don't know who was doing the talking, but there were people in the community or on the farm who suggested that this manager was squandering the owner's property.

We don't know the exact nature of the "squandering," but it is clear that it was a dishonest thing to do. "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer."

The owner rightly asks the manager if the rumors were true. We can imagine that the manager could have responded at this point with a protest about his innocence. Perhaps there was a perfectly good explanation for the "squandering."

But before he can respond the owner orders: "Give me an accounting of your management." He wants an audit --- a look at the books. The manager needs to explain in detail how he had run the farm in the owner's absence. Again there is no chance for any response since the owner delivers the final blow. "You can no longer be manager." This poor manager is fired before he can give an explanation or a defense.

The scene changes abruptly at this point with the impression that the manager is out without a two-week notice. In today's corporate environment, this event would have taken place about 4 pm on a Friday, and the fired employee would be instructed to clean out his desk, turn in his company credit card and office keys while under the watchful eye of security. But in our story, the manager has the opportunity for a few last minute decisions.

He is not physically able to dig ditches. He has no family or friends to count on. Unemployment insurance to tide him over is not available nor government welfare checks --- and he is too ashamed to consider begging. So he hits on a plan to change all that. "I know what I will do, so that when I am removed from management, they may receive me into their houses." And, by doing so, he ensures the debtors, who do not know he has been dismissed, will think of highly of the master as well.

One by one he calls on the people who owe money to the owner and negotiates reduced settlements. To the one owing one hundred jugs of olive oil, the manager says, "Pay it now, and you will only have to pay fifty." The next man owes one hundred containers of wheat. "Pay it now, and you will only have to pay eighty." One man gets a fifty percent reduction in his debt; the other gets a twenty percent. A nice gift if you have a Capital One credit card in your wallet.

We can imagine the results of this action for the manager and for the owner. The debtors would be eternally grateful to the manager. "Listen, we won't forget this kind consideration on your behalf." It was a stroke of genius.

And what do you think the debtors thought about the owner after this debt reduction? They could assume that the negotiation was authorized by the owner, so their opinion of him would skyrocket. Word may have spread through the town, and suddenly the owner found everybody slapping him on the back and singing, "For he's a jolly good fellow." The owner may have enjoyed this newfound popularity and thought, "I should have been more generous before now. Maybe I'll run for mayor!"

Something like that might have happened because the owner responds in the next verse with an unexpected commendation of the dishonest manager, "His lord commended the dishonest manager because he had done wisely."

The master praised the crooked manager, because he knew how to look after himself. Instead of simply being a victim of circumstance, he transforms a bad situation into one that benefits him and others.

This is where this story becomes difficult for the modern mind. Why on earth did this owner commend the dishonest manager who had just caused him to lose a great deal of his wealth? And by implication, Jesus is rewarding this dishonesty as well. He commends him for his shrewdness!

I want you to be smart in the same way, says Jesus, but for what is right --- using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior."

Then he turns to wealth-obsessed Pharisees to discuss the issue of two masters. Though it is hard to comprehend, they were part of an even larger concentration of wealth in the top 1% than there is today!

According to the well-respected Credit Suisse report, the total wealth in the world grew to \$280 trillion, last year; this world-held wealth was increasingly concentrated among fewer; the top 1 percent now owns 50.1 percent of the world's wealth. In today's political wars, the wealthy have become an issue and unfortunately the discussion has wrapped all people of wealth in the same cloth.

How unjust this is to men and women who have worked industriously, intelligently and honestly to build a comfortable estate in opposition to those who have done so unethically and are the subject of the 6 o'clock news! I have worked in community foundations for 30 years and have seen how trustworthy so many people of wealth have been and how it was used to serve others without fanfare --- and in many cases withholding all desire for public recognition.

Though the small gifts of many in this congregation have brought success to our campaigns --- whether it was for expansion, an organ or now for renovation --- sizeable donations were made without any public announcement or a desire for recognition --- some coming at very critical times.

Jesus spoke to those in the first century, as he speaks to us in this one: there is worldly wealth and spiritual wealth and a disciple is to use both wisely and honestly.

Unlike the Pharisees whom Christ addresses, there are well-to-do among us whose lives play out on a foundation of a single verse from Micah: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

A life at any financial level must take root in something that will sustain it and allow it to grow in beauty and reward. All lives face the decision to choose one's master; Christ speaks of the only one who is able to grant life and grant rewarding use of the other.

The shrewd manager knew what was needed to provide for the future. A shrewd street kid knows how to provide what is needed to provide life for a day.

A shrewd Christian knows what is needed for eternal life --- and how one is to live in this one. Amen.

15<sup>th</sup> Pentecost, Cycle C, at Knife River Lutheran Church, September 22, 2019